

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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NICK CARTER'S NEWSBOY FRIEND

OR THE GREAT SANDOVAL MYSTERY



THE AUTHOR
OF
NICK CARTER

"MOVE, AND I FIRE!" SANG OUT TOM'S VOICE, CLEAR AND MENACING AS A PISTOL SHOT.

Fri. Dec. 10. 1920.

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NICK CARTER'S NEWSBOY FRIEND;

OR,

The Great Sandoval Mystery.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

"BRIGHT AS A DOLLAR."

"The other foot, sir!"

Nick Carter put up "his other foot."

The great detective had broken a stroll through the City Hall Park of New York by seating himself in a bootblack's chair.

His surroundings—the temples of law, order and justice, the frequent flitting therefrom of uniformed policemen and uninformed detectives—were suggestive of a whole train of past experience with the criminal classes.

The result was that Nick had fallen into a reverie that had brought up a vivid panorama of cases of counterfeiting, forgery and fraud in which he had acted a principal part in hunting down the perpetrators, and he was scarcely conscious of where he was until the brisk, chattering bootblack at his feet tapped his polished shoe sharply.

Nick put up his other foot, and then incidentally he fixed his "other eye"—that speculative, studious, ever-observant business eye of his—on the active brush-wielder.

For the first moment he noticed him somewhat more than casually, for the boy

had made a remark that interested him.

"Have I gone to shining for a living?" the bootblack was demanding of two urchins who stood watching him—"have I given up literature and taken to leather? No, I haven't."

"It looks like it, Tom," remarked one of the spectators.

"Does it? Well, this is only a shift. Had a chance to rent the chair, wanted to make up a deficiency in the treasury until the evening papers come out, and took this for the day."

"You don't loaf often——"

"Loaf! Who said anything about loafing? That isn't in me. No, dropped a day and two nights, and I'm making up for lost time. Little blind Billy has to be taken care of, and a miss of one day means short rations, you know."

"Where was you?" asked one of the juvenile bystanders. "Picnic?"

"Not I. Tell you where I was—sleuthing."

"Eh?"

"Don't know what 'sleuthing' means?" railed Tom Dawson, scornfully. "Say! have you stopped reading? Look here; day before yesterday a fellow passed a lead dollar on Blind Billy. You know what a

dollar is to us? Say, I was mad. I just got up and stormed. I got inquiring around till I had a perfect description of that big, thieving loafer. He's got his lead dollar back now and a piece of my mind. It took me forty-eight hours to run him down, but—I got there!"

Nick Carter's eye gave a pleased twinkle. He could recognize a spark of genius even under the blackest grime. He bestowed a silent commending glance upon the plucky little amateur man-hunter at his feet.

"How did you do it, Tom?" inquired his two chums in a breath.

"See that?" inquired Tom, holding up one arm and showing half the coat sleeve gone. "And that?" tilting his cap so as to disclose a lump big as an egg. "And that?" exhibiting a whole row of skinned left-hand knuckles. "Mementoes."

"Of following your man?"

"Exactly. I got him, I lost him, I tackled him, he slipped me. One place he was leaving a store. My coat caught in a hinge and I left part of it there. Tumbled into a newly-dug drain and nigh banged my senses out just as I was overhauling him. At last I cornered him. Had to hang sixty feet above nothing on an old broken shutter to swing into his room and say, 'Mister, you'll give me back a silver dollar for a lead one, or I'll give you into charge!'"

"And he did?"

"Did he! My knuckles were just smarting enough where I'd knocked them along the bricks to fire me up to pitching into him and making him. I wasn't afraid."

"Tom, you never was afraid of anything."

"Not where I'm right."

Tap-tap.

Tom's task was completed, and he rapped the second polished boot to tell Nick so.

The latter did not arise, however. The boy's story had interested him. Not that it was remarkable, but the determination, the courage, the stick-at-it principle revealed had caught the detective's fancy.

On a small scale, Tom Dawson was what Nick had been on a big one, and he recognized the persevering tactics of the boy with genuine admiration.

"How much?" inquired Nick, feeling in his pocket.

Just then a passing newsboy halted with a noisy hail to Tom and a stare all around.

"It's usually five cents," vouchsafed Tom, "but that's a dime job if ever there was one. You see, I'm out for all I can make to-day——"

"Well, do we call it a dime then?" smiled Nick.

"Yes—no—say! it's nothing to you—not a red cent."

"Eh!"

Nick looked askance at Tom. A little by-play had escaped even his shrewd notice.

The boy who had just come up had whispered a quick word in Tom's ear.

"Know who you're shining?"

"No," said Tom.

"Nick Carter."

"What!" gulped Tom, under his breath, and with a stare of awe.

"Nothing to me?" spoke Nick. "How is that?"

Tom took off his cap, looking excited rather than embarrassed. Then he said, with the dignity of some naval commander welcoming a royal notability aboard ship.

"I'll just tell you, Mr. Carter. In the first place, it's an honor to shine a famous man like you and brings custom; in the next place, I've heard of you—oh, I don't mean in the paper and that. Everybody knows of what you've done in a detective way. It's from little Billy."

"Ah, indeed?" spoke Nick, curiously.

"Yes sir," pursued Tom, all aquiver with emotion. "Do you remember about a month ago jumping in front of a car and grabbing up a little blind fellow just under the wheels?"

"It seems to me I did hurry a youngster out of the way so the car could go on," replied Nick, carelessly.

"Oh, yes, you did! You saved his life, and I've been hungering to tell you what we thought of it ever since," cried impulsive Tom, two grateful tears starting to his eyes like radiant jewels. "Charge you? Why, it's an honor to have you sit in that chair!"

Nick Carter was used to controlling the

expression of his face, but it glowed momentarily and he could not help it.

The great detective had stood in court, the victor in some wonderful contents of law against crime, the cynosure of hundreds of eyes, and had preserved his countenance as if it were a mask.

He had listened to the ardent praise of judge and jurist time and again, without moving a muscle to indicate that he was affected.

Never, however, had he felt more pleased than by the mute, honest admiration of the four grimed faces regarding him devoutly, as if he was some modern Napoleon.

"That's all right," he said, lightly. "You tell little Blind Billy so, and give him this for me."

Nick extended a bank-note and started to leave the chair.

"No, you don't!" dissented Tom, strenuously, putting his hands behind him—"don't you go to spoil our—our pleasure with offering pay for anything we can do for you."

"Well, I declare!" muttered Nick. "Here's diamonds in the rough worth polishing. Thank you, Tom. I shall find a way to see little Billy again in a few days."

Nick started off, swallowing a troublesome lump in his throat. He was deeply touched, and did not try to hide the fact from himself.

He employed one of those deft backward glances of his to take in unsuspected the coterie of four, standing like statues, reverentially gazing after him. Then with a start he halted, and with a sharp questioning:

"Why not?"

Why not what? Do a good deed—he was full of them. Obey one of those mysterious impulses that gave to Nick Carter's leisure a tinge so philanthropic and practical, that he was blazing his way through life with a whole line of bright blessings for others?"

"I'd rather be him than President of the United States," he heard Tom fervently say as he turned back.

Nick went straight up to his wondering admirer.

"Tom," he said, all business, "how

much do you make a day selling papers?"

"It varies, Mr. Carter."

"Well, what is the average?"

"Seventy-five cents, maybe."

"What would you say to two dollars?"

"Regular?"

"For a month at least."

"What doing?"

"Oh—in my line."

Tom looked positively scared. If a major general had suddenly put a colonel's epaulettes on his shoulders he could not have been more stunned.

"Say!" he gasped, "you're joking?"

"Will you take the contract?"

"Won't I!"

Tom's eyes lit up as if there had suddenly been opened to him a vista of splendid acts leading up to a glorious career.

Then he actually turned pale, as if overwhelmed at trying to realize that it was all true.

"Come there at four o'clock this afternoon," spoke Nick, tendering a card bearing his address.

He departed for good this time. Tom sank to the chair he had vacated, a misty maze over all about him.

"Boys," he said, attempting a weakly smile, "as they say in the play, 'leave me to my thoughts.'"

And, as plain but ambitious Tom Dawson sat dreaming great dreams, building wonderful air castles, recalling everything he had ever heard, read or imagined about the detective career, the news spread like wildfire through the ranks of New York's brightest, most thrifty throng—the never tiring newsboys: Tom Dawson had been taken under Nick Carter's wing, and was going to be a detective!

CHAPTER II.

A QUEER STORY.

Tom was at the door of Nick Carter's house on the tap of the bell.

Never perhaps had a more fluttering mortal passed its threshold, and never did an unfortunate clerk, applying for work, out at elbows and trying to convey an impression of better days, patch up his threadbare attire more diligently than Tom had done.

Little Blind Billy was a protege Tom had picked up from the streets deserted

and homeless, and having secured board and lodging for his charge in safer and surer quarters, Tom had sewed up his ragged sleeve, had mended his tattered cap, had brushed and sponged, had scrubbed face and hands, and polished his gaping shoes till all three shone.

Nick's approving glance told that he noticed this characteristic of neatness in his new protege. In two minutes he had Tom completely at his ease.

"Don't look scared, Tom," he advised indulgently. "This is business, square and simple—so much work for so much money."

This practical statement, however, did not one whit take the glamour of anticipated detective experience out of Tom's ardent mind.

"And don't look worried," continued Nick. "I've picked you out for work you are just qualified to do, and which you will do well just for that reason."

"Thank you," murmured the gratified Tom.

"You are young, but you have in a way seen more of life than the majority of men double your age," pursued Nick. "I would trust to your guess on a man's face, I would rely on your covering ground quick and thorough in case of a surgency, I would bank on your native shrewdness, caution and energy every time, as against that of some of the so-called professional students of humanity who skim the surface and never guess what lies beneath."

"Lots does."

"Correct, and your knowledge of the shady ways of shady men is going to prove an invaluable guide to you. Tom, I am going to put you on a case."

If Nick had told Tom he was going to put him on the directory board of a bank, Tom could no have looked prouder.

"It will take a month of your time, and I shall give you in advance half your month's salary. With that, get your little blind charge safely bestowed somewhere."

"I've done that already," prompted Tom, quickly.

"On what I told you? You have considerable faith in me."

"Who hasn't?" challenged Nick's young champion.

"Get everything off your mind, so you

can work unhampered. I shall give you a plain, simple duty."

"Yes, sir," fluttered Tom.

"One order, which is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the start and the finish, the essence of shadowing and the incentive to nabbing the game in sight."

"What's that, sir?"

"Watch that man!"

Nick was enunciating a broad principle of detective science only, but he spoke with such impressiveness that Tom stared around in a startled way.

"I don't see any man——" he began.

"Oh, he isn't here; I am simply sinking a few necessary facts into your mind. The man in reality I shall show you later."

"And I am to watch him?"

"You are to follow him."

"Wherever he goes?"

"From morning till night you are to be his shadow, his second self."

"I'll try to."

"More than that, you must watch those with whom he comes in contact—any who seem to suspiciously follow him. In fact, at stated intervals I want you to be prepared to report to me, hour by hour and step by step, what this man does to the smallest detail."

Tom looked eager, interested, impressed.

"Do you think you can do that?" asked Nick.

"I will do it!" declared Tom, positively.

"Very well. Now, listen closely."

Nick paused for a moment, as if he was mentally arranging a series of facts which he wished to make very plain to his young pupil.

These facts he proceeded to arrange with a simplicity and clearness that a child could take in.

"The man you are to watch," he began, "is not a criminal."

"Oh!" murmured Tom, and he looked a trifle disappointed.

"He is, rather, a victim. It is a peculiar case. What lies under it I do not know, he does not know. What gives particular interest to the affair, is that this man is a king."

"A what!" cried Tom, incredulously.

"A king."

"A real, genuine——"

"Monarch, ruler, whatever you care to call him," asserted Nick. "There is a little island off the coast of South America called Norona. This man, Sandoval, is its king."

Tom looked as if he thought he was getting into great company. He made no further comment, however, but listened intently.

"About a year ago Sandoval went to Rio Janeiro. There he fell in love with an actress named Maude Rankin. They were married. In six months time they learned that they had made a mistake. They were totally uncongenial. They separated. The wife returned to her parents' home in Rochester, New York, sick of her bargain. This was two months ago."

"Did her husband—did the king go with her?"

"He did. He was a gentleman, weak in some things, but still a man with a fine sense of honor. He took her to her parents. They had a pleasant understanding. He placed ten thousand dollars in bank for her, and bade her good-by forever, leaving her to get a divorce when she liked."

"It's like a play," murmured the rapt Tom.

"Even her brother, Delos Rankin, seemed to consider that Sandoval had acted nobly. He showed him around Rochester, and for a week Sandoval says he was in a revel of excitement—cards and wine from morning till night. He says that week is a perfect blank to him. The last thing he remembers is his brother-in-law, Rankin, putting him on the train and sending him to New York."

"He wasn't robbed or anything?" queried Tom.

"Not at all. Except for the effects of his wild revel, he had apparently been treated fairly and friendly by all hands concerned."

"Sandoval took up his quarters at a retired hotel here. In a day or two he got bad news from his kingdom."

"An insurrection had taken place, and he was advised not to start homeward until certain specific reports were forwarded to him."

"Everything could be arranged all right, he was told, if he would be patient. Now comes the queer part of the story."

"It's pretty queer even so far," declared Tom.

"Well," pursued Nick, "Sandoval has a distant relative in New York, a dealer in fine fruits. He came to me with the case to-day. He told me all I have told you. He also told me something additional. A week ago Sandoval came home to his hotel as usual, a trifle under the influence of liquor, and with two wounds from bullets in his chest."

"Well!"

"They were not dangerous. Questioned, he stupidly declared that he had been under the influence of liquor the night previous, and could not remember how he was wounded—thought somebody fired at him on the street."

"Last night he came home in a similar condition. He was stabbed twice in the neck, and one of the cuts missed a vital cord by just an inch."

"How singular!"

"His relative hints at attempted suicide."

"It don't look it."

"Sandoval again asserts some one must have attacked him, but he cannot remember."

Tom looked thoughtful. There was just enough of an air of mystery in the case to interest him.

"Now, then," proceeded Nick, "I am going to point this man out to you."

"The king?"

"Yes. I will be ready to go with you in five minutes."

Nick left the room. He had not been gone two minutes before a couple of boys entered.

Tom had heard of Nick Carter's detective school that afternoon—of how the veteran thief-taker was selecting material out of which to make future trail-shadows and mystery-expounders, and guessed that the twain must be members of his household.

"Hello!" hailed one, with an amused stare at Tom. "You're the fellow Mr. Carter told us about. Going on a case?"

"I hope so."

"Good disguise. Say, it's great!"

Tom flushed up a trifle.

"What's great? who's disguised?" he demanded.

"All right for a watchman, though," railed the other, unheeding a spice of malicious mischief in his make-up.

Tom did not like the word. Watchman! Humph! That was too much of a let-down from his high aspirations for him to endure silently.

"Say!" he spoke, flaring up a little, "call it watchman if it pleases you, but I'll bet before I get through with it Nick Carter, who can do anything he likes with people, they say, can make a detective of me. See if he don't, and see if I don't help him do it!"

At that moment Nick re-entered the room. He beckoned to Tom, and they were soon on the street.

During a rapid walk of nearly a mile, he talked confidentially to his new protege, and Tom drank in the points with the avidity of a student anxious and willing to learn.

Opposite a large store stocked with fine imported fruits the detective halted.

"I am going into that place," he spoke, "and shall not see nor speak to you again till you come to report to me."

"All right, sir."

"This is the store of King Sandoval's relative I told you about."

Tom nodded understandingly.

"Sandoval himself is there. Yes, I see him. I will engage him in conversation; I will manage to bring him to the door."

Tom tallied off his instructions with eager, intelligent snaps of his bright eyes.

"When I do," pursued Nick, "note him closely."

"I shall do so, sir."

"I expect you to find out what is the mystery of the shots and stabs I told you about. From the minute I leave the store your work begins, I deliver King Sandoval into your charge. That work is comprehended in one broad sentence."

"Yes, sir."

"Watch that man!"

CHAPTER III.

TOM'S FIRST "SHADOW."

Bang!

Within the hearing of startled hundreds, in the very heart of the thriving,

bustling metropolis, the sound, ominous and peculiar, rang out.

To the momentarily halted onlookers the crashing echo signified an every-day accident, to the person nearest to its source, "a narrow graze," but to a boy on the opposite side of the street, Tom Dawson, it announced clearly, unmistakably "the first shot" in his first detective case.

This is what had happened:

Sandoval, king of Norona, and victim of some mysterious menace, leaving the store where Nick Carter had placed Tom on guard, had proceeded toward his hotel.

The route he took must have been a customary one, for, passing a high partly occupied building, there suddenly hurtled from its fourth story a missile, a projectile, a descending mass surely intended to crush out his life at one dread blow.

To passers-by glancing up after the thing was over, it looked as if a large iron box filled with dirt and planted with vines had broken away from the rusted wires holding it in place on some window sill.

The minute, however, that Tom's quick eyes caught sight of the descending object, he caught as well a flashing view of the hand that had started it on its tragic journey.

The box came whirling down with frightful velocity. It so closely grazed the petrified Sandoval that his hat was blown from his head.

It crashed to fragments so near to him that one piece of the thin, brittle metal shied obliquely, grazed his hand and tore a deep gash clear across his fingers.

A woman screamed, another fainted, a policeman ran up. In twenty seconds Sandoval was the centre of a gaping, questioning throng.

What had happened? Was he hurt? How did the box come to fall?

"I don't know," voiced Sandoval, pale and shaking. "Officer, I am quite—quite unnerved. Will you kindly call a cab?"

"I will. Your address first, sir. Card? Thank you. Necessary in case—those careless people up above get too independent, and won't agree to be more careful. May have to prosecute them. Hey, cabby!"

Whoa! Flip! Slam!—quicker than he

had counted, Tom saw Sandoval enconced in a cab, and whirled away before he could make a move.

He could not "hitch behind" with a gaping crowd surrounding. He braced himself for a keen run. Then Tom paused.

He rapidly went over Nick Carter's explicit instructions—to not only watch this man, Sandoval, but as well to keep track of those who followed or menaced him.

The policeman was expatiating on the perils of housewives using window sills for storerooms, was taking down the number of the building preparatory to a report and later tardy investigation.

"We'll make a warning case of this here accident," he stated, oracularly.

"It was no accident!" murmured Tom, impressively. "Shot at two nights ago, stabbed the next night—it's attempted assassination, and this time is Sandoval's narrowest shave. That box was pushed—I saw it done. A woman pushed it. I saw her. The intention was to crush the life out of the man I'm watching."

There was Tom's conclusion in a nutshell, and Tom had facts to substantiate the theory.

For in that swift upward glance of his he had seen an open window, and at it a woman.

The pose of her body showed that she had just exerted some unusual force, the gleam of her dark eyes, eager, malicious, proved that she was timing the fall of the box with breathless hope.

And then as it landed, missing her intended prey, her white teeth clinched, she drew back, Tom saw her dart across the empty room she was in, and knew that with ready avenues for a prompt disappearance prepared beforehand, it would be difficult to follow her.

"Trap planted, trick fails, and no danger but what the woman's safe to get away," muttered Tom. "How's this for a starter, anyway? I tell you, it's serious!"

Serious enough to convince Tom that detective business was not all rush, dash and empty clatter—Tom realized that more forcibly now than ever.

Boy as he was, unskilled in "the profession," a certain solemn awe overcame him as he considered that heartless human beings were undoubtedly leagued to-

gether to crush the life out of another fellow creature.

"Why?" he interrogated himself, and then he added, quickly: "It's no time to dawdle asking idle questions. My duty is to see that Sandoval comes to no harm—the present point what is best for me to do just now?"

Tom rubbed his head thoughtfully. He fancied he must be a pretty poor apology for a detective, for he wavered irresolutely between a notion of scouring the building whence the box had fallen, informing the officer of what he had seen and having the place surrounded, and trying to catch up with the cab which was just gliding around a corner three squares away.

"It's too much for me," he declared, starting forward. "I'd have to be in three or four places at once to do what comes to me to do. I can't follow the woman and the man, too. She's vanished, he's at the hotel where he lives, so I guess the nearest I can come to Mr. Carter's idea would be to go there and look out for the next attempt to kill him."

Tom gave a longing look back at the building. Somehow the fascinating end of the affair seemed to lure him in that direction solely.

Then, setting feet and eyes directly contrary, he made a sharp sprint, lessened it to a dragging gait, and pricked up his ears.

"Keep always on the lookout for suspicious and mysterious happenings around a place where action centres," Nick Carter had laid down to Tom as one of his most valuable rules that afternoon. "You don't know when a whisper, a touch, a look may be the key-note to the biggest kind of a clew."

And of just this injunction Tom was suddenly reminded, as something decidedly uncommon attracted his attention.

At the corner of the street a large sign projected from a doorway.

Half concealed behind it stood a man, tall, active, well-dressed.

If he had not peered eagerly, sharply down the street and directly at the building whence the box had dropped, up and down its front, at the throng gathered near it, Tom would not have particularly noticed him.

But this he did, and more than this. As if some definite point was settled in his mind by the inspection he had made, he now did a strange, and unusual thing.

He carried a cane in his hand. This he suddenly reversed.

Its lower ferrule was a hollow steel cap.

Taking from his pocket a thin round piece of chalk, he exactly fitted it into the tube so that an inch or two projected.

Reversing his cane, with another keen look down the street, he started briskly away.

"What's he up to, anyway?" reflected Tom, puzzled.

"What's he doing that for?" followed a prompt second curious query.

Keeping to the extreme edge of the sidewalk, the man carried his cane like any other promenader—swung it, brought it occasionally down on the smooth pavement.

Only, every time he did this, his hand described a swift, deft twirl.

And every time he its chalk-loaded point, the wondering Tom saw that he had made a definite, uniform mark.

"Say!" blurted Tom, and that was the best way he could express his emotions.

Here was something directly in line with what Nick Carter had described as "suspicious and mysterious."

Had it any connection with the Sandoval case? If the man's look down the street told anything—possibly.

On such slight encouragement had Tom any business to turn from the straight clear task of watching Sandoval? Perhaps—the latter was safe, for the present, at least, at his hotel.

"I'll see what comes of it," decided Tom. "That man is not making those marks for fun. There's too many of them for that."

Tom started after him. He could have followed the man without even looking at him, for every twenty feet at least was a clear chalk mark.

It comprised half circle, cut with a broad slash. At the first crossing street this slash was elongated, and the direction it ran in Tom found was the direction the man pursued.

"Clear as crystals!" mused the interested trailer. "He's blazing a course for some one to follow. Who, I wonder?"

After going about three squares, the man began to get nearer the inner edge of the sidewalk.

Suddenly he whirled, shot a piercing glance back of him, describing a sudden movement with his cane in front of him, and—vanished.

Tom was some distance from him as he executed these manoeuvres; several pedestrians, too, blocked a perfect view.

"Where's he got to so suddenly?" projected Tom.

Then he saw a great chalk mark crossed a high door-gate guarding a private entrance to a place with the sign, "Cafe," on its front.

"That's where he went—through that doorway," declared Tom. "Then he's waiting for somebody, I'll bet. And then again, maybe not. Through to another street, for all I know. I'll find out. Here, Chuck! give me them all."

After a quick glance along the street, Tom darted ahead to where a little urchin was calling out an evening newspaper.

Too much of an expert was Tom not to estimate at a glance the number the little fellow carried under his arm.

"Hello, Tom——" began the newsboy.

"Mum it is! There's a quarter. Follow your nose and don't look at me. Ex-try! Here's your ex-try—full account of—rumity-tumity—disaster--clicketty-clacketty people killed!"

Tom grabbed the papers from the startled newsboy's one hand, planked the coin in his other, and darted squarely for the door with the chalk mark on it.

He was the hustling irrepressible gamin complete—not afraid to penetrate anywhere with his sense-exciting scare-voice and breathless manner.

Back went the door with a slam, and down four steps went Tom, seemingly only a daring paper-seller, but his eyes bored into every crack and corner like gimlets.

There were not many. A straight boarded-up space ran to an open side door of the cafe.

The man with the chalk cane was nowhere in sight.

"Is he in the cafe? I'm going to know. Extry! full account—paper, sir?"

Through the open side door of the

place, into a dark rear room, Tom dove boldly.

His glance took in every object in sight—a huge ice-box, chairs, tables, and seated at a shuttered window, looking as if he was impatiently awaiting some one, was the man he was after, just as he had guessed.

"Get out of here!" roared the aproned keeper of the place as Tom made a hurricane dash clear to the street.

In a flash, once there, he whipped the papers into the gutter.

Through that gate-door just swung to after him, Tom dove.

A daring plan had come into his head. Under the spur of the excitement of the moment he put it into instant execution.

The man in the cafe was waiting to meet somebody, and it could be no ordinary appointment that he put that somebody on his trail like Indians do their fellows in the wild West, theorized the excited Tom.

That "somebody" would sooner or later appear, would join the man in the rear room of the cafe.

Of course they would talk, and to overhear them, Tom was satisfied, would surely be to discover something sinister and interesting.

Way down in Tom's mind, too, there was a hope, a bare hope, that this something might have some connection with the box that had dropped so near to Sandoval.

For the man with the cane had inspected the building whence it had hurtled with no casual interest.

"If I can only make it!" breathed Tom, and he crept cautiously, but swiftly along the passageway down which he just ran.

He got to the side door. He knew just the point he was making for—a safe hiding-place.

Swift as had been Tom's dash through the place, those shrewd eyes of his had taken in every detail of the room.

He had noticed the big ice-box. The door of one of its compartment was open.

He had, furthermore, discerned inside the ice-box a small ventilating aperture, screened with fine wire, which came within two feet of the table at which the man

with the chalk cane sat. His back was to Tom now.

"Can I make it?" fluttered Tom. "Got to!" he concluded, with a start, and glided forward.

At that moment the street gate slammed. The man at the table bent his ear eagerly.

Light, rapid footsteps echoed down the passageway walk.

There was but one thing for Tom to do, and he did it.

He made a shadow-like dive. Through the ice-box rear door he went.

A clammy chill cooled down his ardor a trifle as he found himself in a zinc-lined apartment.

He half drew the door shut after him. Then he wormed his way to the little aperture covered with wire netting. He could see through it against the light, he was directly at the elbow of the man he had so cleverly shadowed hither.

Tom gave a low chuckle of satisfaction. He was immensely pleased with the success of his first detective exploit.

Then he bent his ear to listen—to listen to a conversation that was destined to fairly make his hair rise.

CHAPTER IV.

"ATCHION!"

"Burr-rr!"

The minute Tom got quieted down he made a discovery of discomfort that caused him to hope the interview about to take place would be a short one.

It was cold in the icebox. The compartment he was in held nothing but several rows of bottles on a metal shelf overhead, but little gratings let in frigid blasts from the real ice chambers.

Violent exercise had warmed him up considerably, and he felt the sudden change of some forty degrees of temperature most vividly.

"Door open, netting hole right at my nose—guess I won't quite freeze," decided Tom. "Oh, my! oh, my! oh, my!"

All this Tom said to himself, but so fervently that every nerve in his body wriggled.

To use a common saying, he was "nearly tickled to death," as what boy in his place would not be!

For just then there was an arrival. The

man at the table got up to welcome the same.

Then he sat down again, and there sat down with him the visitor who had located him through the chalk marks.

"It's her!" Tom gasped, in one tremendous triumphant gulp. "Run down the first crack out of the box!"

What would Nick Carter say to this—the person who had attempted the life of Sandoval located by his new assistant within one hour after he had started him on the case?

Tom peered through the little wire netting with starting eyes.

He recognized the woman in a flash. Her face from which she threw a thick veil, dark and tragic, he had only seen at a distance, but the eyes, the dress, the ringed hand—he could swear positively that this was the woman who had pushed the box from the window sill which had so narrowly escaped making an end of Sandoval.

"Now then!" muttered Tom, bestowing himself as comfortably as he could, and preparing to listen to whatever might be spoken between the two at the table not three feet away.

But neither spoke. Their glances met. The woman looked sullen, the man angry. Then the latter arose, went to the front of the cafe, and shortly returned.

"Certainly no one shall interrupt you," spoke the approved owner of the establishment, bustling after him. "I'll fix that."

He unloosed the curtains screening the connecting archway. Then he closed and locked the rear door, and then, incidentally passing the ice-box, he did something else that took Tom's breath away.

Noticing this open door, the man gave this a careless kick. Bang! it went shut—click! went a snap, and Tom experienced a dawning sensation of dismay.

"Caged? I guess," he ruminated. "Well, we'll attend to getting out when the time comes."

The keeper of the place retired to the front again. Left alone, the two at the table got down to business.

"Well?" propounded the man.

"Missed!"

"Bungled, you mean."

"Take care!" flared up the woman, her dangerous eyes snapping.

"Wasn't it?"

"Try it yourself, next time."

"Me? oh, dear, no! I can hire too many," derided the man, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"See here," spoke the woman, rapidly and forcibly, "I have tried to help you, I have blindly followed your directions, but I do so no longer if I am to be sneered at."

"You have had three chances."

"Yes, shot twice. Try it on the public streets, you, and see how quick a crowd gathers! I barely escaped."

"And the knife thrusts?"

"Stupid as he was, Sandoval shouted. I had to fly. As to the box—was it not a clever scheme? I knew he passed that way nightly. Well, I failed again. What have you to say next?"

The man bent his brows in an ugly, knitted frown. Then he looked up, and Tom fancied he had never seen a more ferocious face.

"I say," he announced—"it must be done!"

"That means try again?"

"Not try, but do it!"

"Oh, there shall be no failure this time!" laughed the woman.

"Confident, eh?"

"I am. So far, you have restricted me. This Sandoval was to die an accidental death."

"It was necessary to my scheme."

"How would a mysterious death do?"

"You mean poison? No, that would not do. I want no post-mortems, no investigation."

"There will be none. See here, Delos Rankin, I can put this man out of the way to-night, as he sleeps in his room, so quickly, so surely, that all the doctors and detectives in Christendom would never guess what killed him."

"What's that?" muttered Tom, with a vivid start. "Rankin? Why——"

He became lost in conjecture. Rankin! That was the family name of the actress Sandoval had married.

Heretofore, Tom's theory about the attempts on Sandoval's life had been confined to the suspicion that some enemy from his kingdom, some emissary of the new insurrectionary party now in power there, was bent on putting him out of the

way so as to make their position doubly strong.

But now he knew better. The minute he heard the man with the chalk cane called Delos Rankin, that minute he guessed out a new set of motives for the attempts on Sandoval's life.

"He's the brother of Sandoval's wife," theorized Tom, and he soon learned that he was correct in the surmise.

The man the woman had called Rankin regarded him intently.

"You are promising a good deal," he remarked.

"I can execute as well."

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"Good!"

"Provided——"

Rankin's face drew down.

"Provided that you answer me a question."

"That's easy."

"You may not find it so when I come to tell you what it is. Let us understand each other.

"For years you have known me—clairvoyant, mystic, fortune-teller, with all the grewsome accompaniments of owls, snakes and charms. Whenever you wanted help in your gambling schemes, I was on hand."

"And I paid you well."

"I have no complaint on that score."

"Then——"

"But this is a different affair," persisted the woman.

"How?"

"Plainly—murder!"

The man trembled slightly. His glance shifted. Then he set his hard lips harder.

"Go ahead," he said, simply.

"There's a risk. Do I mind that? No. You promised me ten thousand dollars for putting this man, Sandoval, out of the way."

"And will pay it promptly on delivery of the goods."

"I don't doubt that, but—in a case like this, I won't work in the dark."

"What's that!"

"No, I've been thinking it over. Suppose the bullets struck right, the knife went two inches farther, the box was timed a tenth of a second closer?"

"Why, then your task was ended, and you were a rich woman."

"And if I was caught?"

Rankin simply shrugged his shoulders, as if that was her affair solely.

"Exactly!" spoke the woman, rightly interpreting the movement—"I could save myself as best I might. Could I implicate you? Why! with your precautions, you could laugh at me."

"But you are too shrewd a woman to be caught."

"I can be."

"Oh!"

"The next time."

"Good!"

"But there will be no next time. I shall drop the case, here and now at once, unless I know the ins and outs of this entire matter. In an affair of such moment, I have a right to your confidence. Give it to me, or I drop the case. I have spoken."

The man glared at her. The listening Tom was wriggling like a weasel, drinking in every word.

"Go ahead," growled Rankin, biting his lips wrathfully. "What do you want to know?"

"Why do you wish this man, this king, Sandoval, dead?"

"Short and sweet, it's one hundred thousand dollars in my pocket."

"How?"

The woman was persistent, and the watching Tom admired her for it.

"Well, it is, that's all."

"Is your sister, his wife, inciting you to it?"

"Bless you, no!" cried Rankin, forcibly. "Her? Why, he treated her like a prince. Gave her ten thousand dollars. They parted the best of friends."

"Are you after more money he has?"

"He has none. Comparatively speaking, he is now a poor man."

"Then you expect his widow to become heiress to his kingdom?"

"Wrong again—he has no kingdom. It is in a state of revolt. Even if he gets back to the throne, the country is so in debt he couldn't raise a dollar. No, no. I depend on no such broken reed as that. My hundred thousand comes from the safest, soundest, surest sources in New

York, on the tap, cash down, the minute King Sandoval passes in his checks!"

"Tell me how. Come, you have excited my curiosity!"

"Isn't a sure ten thousand good enough for you?"

"Prove to me it's sure."

"I'll do it! You're a clever woman, a true helper, a good friend," cried Rankin, in a burst of confidence. "If I do, Viola, Sandoval dies to-night?"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"As fate."

"Secretly——"

"Silently. His death can never be traced to you, to me."

"Very well, I will tell you."

Tom could hardly keep still. He was on such pins and needles of suspense, that he crowded up close to the minute wire netting panel.

There was about to be pronounced the mystery of an apparent paradox.

How, by compassing the death of a comparatively poor man, Rankin expected to become an extremely rich one.

It was a secret worth knowing—it would give to Nick Carter the key to the whole dense mystery surrounding King Sandoval.

Rankin bestowed an impressive look on his companion and began.

"I am going to tell you, Viola. How I come to get one hundred thousand dollars the minute King Sandoval dies, is——"

He did not conclude. It was Tom himself who interrupted, spoiled, silenced that vital revelation.

And he did it with a sudden, helpless, resounding:

"Atchion!"

CHAPTER V.

CAGED.

"Atchion!"

The sound rang out startlingly, and the more so because Tom's face was right up to the peep-hole that had stood him in such good service during the past half-hour.

Atchion!—not once, not twice, but three, four, five, six, eight, ten, twelve—a round dozen times!

Tom had loaded up with cold air, and the result was unavoidable. No human

being could have repressed those violent sneezes.

He tried to smother them, he stuffed his handkerchief against his face, he strangled himself with both hands, but it was too late.

The alarm was given. Both Rankin and his companion started to their feet. The former looked puzzled, the latter angry, at an interruption at a vital climax.

"What in the world is that?" cried Rankin.

"Oh! a cat, I suppose, or some other animal," petulantly responded Viola.

"No, it was a person sneezing. Brown!"

"Yes, sir," called out the proprietor of the place, appearing past the curtained archway.

"What you got in that ice-box?"

"Oho! Thirsty, eh?"

"No, no. I am not joking. We heard some one there."

"Some one where?"

"Inside of it."

"A person, you mean?"

"I do."

"Nonsense! Why, look for yourself," and the man opened the main glass door of the refrigerator. Tom had stopped sneezing. Now he began again.

"Not in that part behind here," corrected Rankin. "Hear that! and that!"

"Goodness!" goggled the man. "That's so."

Tom struggled to his hands and knees. With one shoulder he butted the closed metal-sheeted door.

Held with catch and bar on the outside, it defied his efforts.

"Got to get out some way! I'm spotted, sure," he breathed, excitedly. "It can't be built so awful strong," and he straightened up.

His head struck something as he did so, and he instantly guessed what it was—the bottle-loaded shelf, chin-high.

There was a frightful clatter. He guessed that the man and woman, judging from outside sounds, were hurrying away in alarm. The owner of the place, with startled ejaculations, was tugging to open the refrigerator door.

It gave. For the way to freedom opened Tom made a bolt.

The aperture, however, was too small to admit of very much progress. Describing a kind of a dive, Tom landed against the bewildered outsider, drove him back, tumbled in a heap to the floor, and before he could gain his feet and run was grabbed by a powerful arm.

"Let me go!" cried Tom, vigorously.

"Yes, I will. What you doing in there, anyway?"

"I was—resting."

"Blue blizzards! Look at that!"

The man caught a flashing glimpse of shattered bottles and trickling contents.

He gave Tom a shake. Then he looked again. Then he dragged him toward the door, and Tom was a mere feather in the grasp of a giant.

Evidently, in his first wrathful outburst, the man was minded to deliver Tom up to the nearest policeman. Just nearing the archway, however, a voice halted him:

"Brown!"

The man turned, and the helpless Tom glanced backward, too.

At the side door, quite pale and disturbed looking, was Rankin.

"Who is he?" was projected suspiciously.

"Looks like a wharf rat, acts like a thief. Planted there in the ice-box to rob me, I suppose, after I'd shut up."

"Oh! do you—you don't suppose he was watching, listening?"

"Him? Not much! Says he was 'resting!' Fine place to sleep! Must have come before you did. Think of that damage!"

"I'll pay that."

"Why——"

"Yes, I will," insisted Rankin. "Say, I'm in a hurry just now, but I'll be here again. Don't give that boy in charge."

"No?"

"Not yet, at least. Can't you lock him up somewhere—keep him safe till I have time to see—to see——"

"I understand," nodded the man, knowingly. "You want to find out if he's been nosing around in your business?"

"Exactly."

"I'll keep him safe and sound till morning."

"Do so. I'll make it all right with you."

"Come on, you young sneak thief!"

Tom had given up active resistance. He saw that it was useless, and only made his captor's iron fingers twine more cruelly, but he watched out for a chance to trip up, slide or slip.

The opportunity for any such manoeuvre, however, was not allowed him. To a door the man dragged him, opened it, pushed him before him down some steps, and Tom found himself in a close cellar about twenty feet square.

It had shelves for furniture only, and these were loaded with row after row of cobwebbed bottles.

"You cool off there, you destructive rascal! You 'rest' where I'll find you when I want you," observed the man.

He locked the door as he retired. Tom was up those steps in a flash. For a few minutes he pried with his fingers, peeped through the cracks.

"Double lock, bolt and chain," he finally guessed. "Well, if there's no window below, I reckon I'm booked for a free all-night berth."

Tom groped around the dark cellar. Except for two four-inch ventilating gratings, there was not a break in the solid stone wall.

He sat down to reflect. The most tormenting question was what Nick Carter would say to his taking an independent course in following Rankin, and thereby getting into his present trouble.

There was a prospect of Tom remaining a prisoner until morning, and by that time the plot against King Sandoval would have succeeded.

"It's terrible to think of!" murmured Tom. "All the same, if I hadn't got clutched by that bruiser overhead, and had got to Mr. Carter and warned Sandoval, what a howling success I'd have been, orders or no orders! I reckon it's success only that counts, no matter how accidental it comes. Oh, drat it! Cooped up like a rat, and no help for it! I'll discover away!"

Tom was aroused, for he was conscious that all his clever work of the past hour would count for nothing in the face of final disaster.

He comprehended, further, that every hour he was inert meant sixty minutes

surer approach to death for the menaced Sandoval.

And then, as he realized that he was the only person in the world, probably, who could help the beleaguered king, he felt that he must do something, if it was only to keep from thinking.

"I was foolish not to fight, kick, yell, draw a crowd up stairs there," he declared. "I could show up all right to people or police. The man, Brown, couldn't, for he's in with Rankin, in a way, sure. Wish I was up stairs again! Why, say! I'll get there!"

Tom's eyes snapped confidently, and he chuckled.

He moved over to a row of bottles, and, groping, began to pile dozen or more across one arm.

"It comes high, but we can't stop at costliness!" he gloated. "My place is in a police station if I've done wrong, not cooped up in a private cellar. It's an infringement of tyranny, so here goes! I'll bring that lunky giant down among his dusty treasures, or know the reason why."

Tom drew back, poised a bottle in his free hand, took blind aim, and let it drive.

Whack-bang!

It struck the door at the head of the stairs. Back came a shower of glass. Trickle-drip-drop echoed the mellow gurgle of wine.

Whack—bang!

The cobwebbed recesses of the close cellar gave back a hundred startling echoes.

Footsteps, heavy, hurried, sounded overhead, a frantic groan, approaching a roar, told Tom that he had succeeded in arousing the lion at last.

The door opened at the top of the stairs. Tom had light now to direct his aim.

He took sight at a tempting row of bottles on a shelf. They went down like tenpins.

"What you doing—oh, what you doing!" yelled the frenzied owner of all this accumulating wreckage.

"I'm practicing, mister," announced Tom, airily.

"Boy, I'll—I'll kill you!"

"Guess not!"

"Stop! stop!"

Tom unloaded four more bottles and

tipped over twenty others with another deft throw.

"See here, mister," he called up, as the man reached back of him and grabbed up a heavy club, "don't you come at me with that. I'll give you the next bottle if you do!"

"Then stop!"

"I'll stop when I get out of here—not before."

"Get out of here? Yes, yes, you shall! Come here!"

The man descended three steps. Then he made a spring.

It was Tom's intention to attempt to dodge past him, but the man was too quick for him.

He fairly swooped on Tom, flinging him to the ground and falling on top of him.

Then he struck at him wildly, jabbing his head back on the hard stone floor, beating his heavy fists into Tom's eyes, slamming him, banging him, in a transport of the wildest fury.

Tom was wholly stunned for a minute by the fierce onslaught, for he afterward had no recollection of being carried up the stairs.

His senses only partly returned as he opened his eyes and saw that he was on the main floor again, but he had not the strength to call out as he had planned.

A bruised, wavering plaything in the hands of his powerful captor, Tom only shuddered as he observed that near the ice-box the man had lifted a trap-door.

A dark hole yawned. Into it the man savagely flung Tom, with the words:

"You couldn't leave well enough alone, eh? Well, see if you like those quarters any better!"

CHAPTER VI.

A BOLD BREAK.

If Tom's first prison place in the cafe was gloomy, his second dungeon was positively repellant.

He landed with a shock on what he found to be a heap of coal. Through the trap, it seemed, the man had been in the habit of sweeping all his refuse, and lemon peel, cigar stubs, beer dregs and old vegetables littered the place and made the air reeking.

It was fully half an hour before Tom found himself in any shape to move about.

The man had given him a dreadful beating, and his tumble into this vile coal hole had not brightened him up any.

As muscles, wits and emotions got back to normal, however, Tom displayed the usual vim of a genuine New York gamin—he got mad as a hatter.

"I'll be even with that fellow if it takes a year!" he muttered, "and I'll nip his scheme of holding me for that villain Rankin, to pump, if nerve and energy can do it."

Tom's hopes went down a degree or two, however, as he proceeded to closely inspect his new quarters.

The place was lighter than the cellar, for it had a window. This was about two feet square, but provided with bars placed every three inches apart, and sunk into the heaviest kind of hard wood planking, top and bottom.

At the end of half an hour Tom made up his mind pretty conclusively that he could hope to accomplish very little in the way of getting out of his prison place with only a broken-bladed pocket-knife.

He was strong, but he could not budge the bars. A white washed windowless wall faced him ten feet away. There was a little yard space between. The man who ran the cafe probably used this, and Tom decided that shouting would only bring his brutal jailer down upon him.

All his conclusions were justified by the appearance of the big burly ruffian in the yard a few minutes later.

He dragged a stool beside a log, drew some sawed pine slabs from a pile invisible to Tom's range of vision, and began to chop these up into kindling.

"You like your new quarters better?" he sneered, tauntingly, to Tom, who, grasping the bars of the window, was peering out at him. "Hungry? You can gorge on lemon peel. Thirsty? I'm going away for a spell, but I'll tell my young man to drop a pail of water on you once in awhile to keep you cooled down. You're a fiery one, you are, but I'll take some more of it out of your hide in the morning, if some one don't pay me for your new damage."

Tom responded not a word. He watched the man at his work from the

window dolefully enough, acknowledging that he held the upper hand just now.

"You keep quiet if you're wise," advised the man, making an armful of the kindling and moving away.

"Good!"

Tom bolted out the word, and his heart surged with sudden hope.

With glowing eye he noted the spot where the man had just sat.

The kindling cutter had left behind him the short-handled ax he had been using.

Inasmuch as it was some fifteen feet away from Tom, and inasmuch as it was not only completely out of reach, but with blade sunk inch deep in the cutting log, a careless observer might have wondered at the stimulation its presence gave to Tom's heart every time he regarded it.

He listened intently. Would the man return for it? Yes, he was coming. No, only closing some door. Then his footsteps sounded at the front of the place.

"To work!" cheered Tom, aglow with delight. I see a way out."

He began selecting, doubling and tying together several of the numerous pieces of string lying among the refuse until he had a stout cord over twenty feet long.

Of the lead foil caps of bottles he made a ball weighing several ounces.

Of the wire that had encased the neck of a pop bottle he constructed a rigid hook.

Then Tom was ready for business.

He made several throws through the bars. It took infinite skill and patience to lasso the ax; it required some delicate manipulation to loosen it from the chopping log.

At last he accomplished this. Then the real expert angling began.

Inch by inch Tom looped and dragged the ax across the fifteen-foot yard space.

How his fingers thrilled as he drew it right up to the window, reached through the bars and seized it!

"Blade good steel, handle solid oak," jubilated Tom. "She comes. Ah, I knew I would make it!"

Tom employed the ax simply as a pry. Once he got the blade edge under the lower plank in which the bars were imbedded, and it began to give, he knew he was as good as free.

At last he had it lifted. Under it the bars were barely tipped into mortar and lead. One vigorous jerk bent the entire structure out of plumb.

It was just dusk when Tom crawled out into the yard. He was dripping from head to foot with perspiration.

He made his way by a devious course to the street—over a shed, up into one building, down through another, and two squares away from the cafe he sat down on the curb to cool off.

"Made it!" he piped, cheerily, "so what's the odds? It all counts as experience. Now then, to get back to the track and make no more mistakes. Mistakes? Who's made one? Why, I've got the whole scheme and the parties cinched clean. I'll go straight to Mr. Carter, report, and see what he says."

Tom started faithfully enough for headquarters, but it was not fated that he should reach them.

Half a mile further on, leisurely and thoughtfully trudging along, he eyed a form in advance speculatively; then with a fancied tinge of recognition and then with an eager interest that set all his impetuous nature agog on a new track of procedure at once.

"It's her!" breathed Tom.

So certainly was it the woman he had seen with Rankin three hours previous, that Tom was enabled to compare a dozen familiar points in her attire with memory pictures of what he had noted when in the ice-box.

The woman was veiled, and was walking like a person not exactly in a hurry, but still like one on business rather than pleasure bent.

She carried a hand-bag of large size. Tom noticed that it bulged as if well packed.

"It's her!" he retold himself. "Where's she bound? For Sandoval? Why not? She said 'to-night.' Say, I don't dare lose sight of her!"

In his trepidation and excitement, Tom followed so closely at the woman's heels that, as she had to momentarily pause to allow a baby carriage to pass, he stumbled fairly upon her.

"What do you want?" she demanded, sharply.

Tom saw no recognition in her eyes,

only the natural temper of an irritable nature. She had not seen him at the cafe, he was sure of this.

Her glance revealed that she took him in carelessly as an ordinary street gamin, and Tom presumed on this supposition.

He did a very bold thing.

"Madam," he said, humbly, "would you let a poor fellow earn a nickel carrying your hand-bag for you?"

CHAPTER VII.

ROOM 156.

Tom had offered to carry the woman's hand-bag more to hide his embarrassment than anything else.

To his surprise, she gave him a second keen glance, and said:

"Very well, if you need the nickel, I will let you earn it."

"Thank you, ma'am," mumbled Tom.

He puckered his lips to a speculative silent whistle as the hand-bag in question was delivered into his keeping.

Here was a bold stroke, indeed!—a resolute facing of the enemy, a daring invasion of tabooed territory.

What would Nick Carter say to this? wondered Tom, and how was it likely to turn out?

One thing Tom was positive about—the woman, with all her heartlessness, was perhaps spasmodically impulsive and generous, and had simply taken pity on his seemingly forlorn condition.

One thing Tom was worried about—suppose she led him straight to some street corner or doorway where Rankin was waiting for her?

Rankin had seen Tom, and would recognize him. More than that, finding Tom free when he supposed him caged up, Rankin would at once take the alarm and get himself and his colleague out of reach.

"Wish I knew her programme—wish I knew what I interrupted Rankin telling her in the cafe," mused Tom. "If I only had that point, I'd know the motives of the whole game, and the case would be ended. Wonder what she's got in the hand-bag? I'm almost tempted to make a bolt with that. It might tell something."

Tom "changed hands." For a small

receptacle, the hand-bag was certainly very noticeable.

"Weighty? I should say! Thirty pounds if an ounce," ruminated Tom. "Think it was gold, or lead."

Tom's curiosity was aroused. He deftly swung the bag so that he could hold it with one hand and feel across its bulging surface with the other.

"Fat as a drover's purse," he commented.

"Something soft and flabby inside. Solid? I guess! What is it, anyway?"

Tom dented in the leather exterior with a dozen finger pokes.

Then the ends of those fingers tingled and thrilled.

"The dickens!" he muttered.

He had made a sudden, a startling discovery.

Whatever the woman's hand-bag contained, it was—alive!

He had disturbed something, and it moved—he had felt it, he could feel it now, for the bag vibrated as at the slight shifting of its contents.

Tom got terribly excited. He could not help it. Viola was a sinister woman, and that nameless, mysterious something in her hand-bag predicted a sinister proceeding.

"What is it?" he puzzled his brain frantically, and was fingering the clasp of the bag preparatory to taking a sly peep, when the woman's voice disturbed him.

One square, two squares she had proceeded, grimly silent, and Tom had been thinking so hard, was so engrossed in the hand-bag that he had not noticed particularly the course she had taken.

Abruptly pausing under a flaring bracket street lamp, the woman held out her hand.

"That will do," she spoke.

Tom reluctantly delivered up the hand-bag.

"Here's your nickel, boy."

It was a quarter she gave Tom.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Tom, tipping his cap. "Why, what's this?"

The woman had hurriedly entered a hallway. For the first moment noticing the building, Tom was excited anew.

It was the hotel where Sandoval lived. Its name stood out plainly on the lamp. Nick Carter had spoken it that afternoon,

had even given Tom the number of Sandoval's room—156.

"Here's business," muttered Tom, staring blankly at the door to the ladies' entrance, which had just closed on the trim figure of the woman with the mysterious hand-bag.

Here was business, indeed! Things were beginning to fit with a nicety, to move with a rapidity that kept Tom's head whirling.

The woman Viola had promised Rankin to remove Sandoval from an earthly sphere that night.

What but a move looking to that end in view could her presence at the hotel signify?

"She's on his track, hot and prompt," thought Tom. "My! she's a—corker! Pistols, knives, loaded flower-boxes—what next? Something doubly deadly this time. She told Rankin so. Is it in the hand-bag? If it is, it's something alive. It's getting harrowing. Well, I'm at the right place to find out what, and at the right time, that's sure."

Tom devoted a minute to practical thought. Should he follow the woman? It would be difficult to keep direct on her trail.

He entered the main entrance of the hotel, unnoticed among the many persons standing and lounging around, slid into a seat near the clerk's desk, and fixed his eye through a doorway commanding a perfect view of the private stairway of the hotel.

"She's gone up, she can't come down without my seeing her, if they don't root me out from here," formulated Tom.

"Front! Ladies' parlor," just here spoke the clerk, and Tom guessed that the new arrival had shot the button he heard drop on the indicator behind the desk.

A boy started swiftly across to the private staircase, flitted up it, was gone two minutes, flitted down again and up to the clerk's desk.

"Lady in parlor. Register Mrs. Huldah Warner, Poughkeepsie," he announced, reading from a penciled strip of paper.

"Any baggage?" queried the clerk, taking up his pen.

"No, sir—here you are."

The boy unpalmed a two-dollar bill, half turned away, his mission apparently executed, and then came back abruptly.

"Wants 155."

"Hello!" jerked out Tom.

"Eh?" ejaculated the clerk. "Oh! probably directed by some old customer who knows our best rooms. Can't have it. Taken."

"Then she says 157 will do."

"Hello!" projected Tom, still more forcibly.

"Let's see. All right. Front!" and another boy came forward. "Take key and show lady in parlor to 157."

Tom's face was working with sentient thoughts. All the suspicions he had entertained for the past few moments were positive certainties now.

The woman Rankin had sent hither to kill King Sandoval had managed to get a room directly next to him.

Thoroughly posted, she had arrived on the scene and had got in the best possible position to carry out her deadly plans, without obstacle or delay interfering.

Tom had sense. He knew that the average police officer in his present position, having both victim and plotter under the same roof, and positive proof of their mutual relations, would simply call assistance, apprehend the woman red-handed, and settle affairs at one easy stroke.

But Tom had enthusiasm, extravagant ideas of "fine work," a craving for brilliant action, and all that.

The way he had read it, real smart detectives like to play with their game like a cat with a mouse—like to unwind the reel of mystery clear to the end.

"I won't make any bad break. There's no hurry. She's only getting placed, and will begin her work later," theorized Tom. "Let me see? It's about eight o'clock. She don't know, and I don't know if Sandoval is in his room at all—maybe not even in the hotel. The question to decide is, shall I hurry and report to Mr. Carter first, or find out and warn Sandoval first?" Tom saw framed and hung on the side of the clerk's high desk a plan of the hotel.

There were five floors. He studied them for a moment, and located Room 156. It was four flights up at the side of

the hotel, and, according to the plan, three windows back from the sidewalk frontage.

"Pretty near find that in the dark," murmured Tom.

"Here, youngster, take a slide!"

The hotel officer discovered Tom right here, and nudged him warningly.

"Got business," declared Tom, prompted to dispatch it under urgency.

"Get through with it, then."

Tom approached the clerk's desk.

"I wish to see Mr. Sandoval, Room 156," he said.

"Not to be disturbed. Come in the morning. Quite ill," chopped off the clerk, with a careless glance at Tom's newsboy attire.

The officer hustled Tom along and into the street before the latter could think out what was next best to do.

"Huh!" flared Tom; "guess they'd change their tune if they knew who I was, if I said 'Nick Carter!' He said never tell who you are, though, or your business, until necessary—never call in help till sure you've got everything just right. Have I?"

Tom knew he had a shrewd woman to deal with. Suppose, alarmed, she removed or destroyed all evidences of murderous intent, or these were so subtle as not to be identified until employed, and denied Tom's unsupported accusation?

"I'd like to get my eye on her, in that room, 157, for about five minutes," ruminated Tom. "I'd just like to guess what she's up to."

Tom looked along the inside wall of the hotel whence he knew the room in question faced.

Next door was a two-story frame store, closed for the night. The upper floors of the hotel loomed above this.

"One, two, three"—Tom counted the windows from the front. "That's her room next—lighted. Inside blinds closed, but there's chinks of light. Wish I was at short range! What's the matter with going up the fire-escape?"

Such a contrivance ran from the top of the hotel to the roof of the next building. That roof, therefore, was Tom's first objective point of ascent.

It was not a difficult task to work his way around to the rear. Within ten min-

utes Tom was on the roof in question, his hand on the first bar of the iron ladder.

The side of the hotel where it ran was in comparative shadow from the bright corner electric lights, it was far enough back from the street to be out of near sidewalk range.

Tom went up the fire-escape till he reached its little grated platform in the fourth story.

It ran between two windows, and he was sure one of these was in Room 157, occupied by the clairvoyant, the other in 156, occupied by Sandoval.

As he had before noticed, 157 had a light inside—156 was shrouded in darkness.

Tom guessed that Sandoval, with nerves badly shaken up by his latest recent encounter, had retired to rest.

He leaned cautiously toward the window of the lighted room. There was no loop-hole in the lower sash blinds.

Where the upper set swung to, however, there was a crack perhaps half an inch wide.

To this Tom applied his eye. The interior of the apartment was in plain view now.

The woman he did not see at first. Her hat and veil and jacket lay on the bed, her handbag on the table.

Finally, twisting himself a little around, Tom got a more complete view of the rear wall of the room.

"There she is, sitting down on the floor. At work, and of all the queer things in this queer world, what in the name of goodness is she doing?"

He might well ask!

Tom had arrived on the scene just in time to view as strange, as mystifying a proceeding as any he had ever witnessed.

CHAPTER VIII.

BAFFLED.

The clairvoyant sat on the floor right up against the wall of 156, Sandoval's room, and she had an auger in her hand.

With this she was boring a hole through the base boards.

"I'm staggered!" confessed Tom, peering blankly.

What was the woman's intention? Her jeweled hands flashed as they noiselessly

bit rapidly manipulated the bright steel tool.

Suddenly they paused. From her movements Tom could guess that the bit had pierced the first board, was probing in the empty space between it and the one three inches distant which fitted to the floor of Sandoval's room.

The clairvoyant simply got a start on the invisible board. Then she arose.

Tom followed her every movement, fascinated.

She first drew from her pocket a little instrument resembling a flute.

This she placed on the floor near the hole she had made in the base board. An aperture, Tom estimated, with the auger withdrawn, to be about the size of a silver dollar.

Next she produce a fine steel saw. This, too, found itself in place alongside the base board, evidently to be used in enlarging the hole.

Then she lifted the hand-bag, placed it carefully on the floor in the same spot, and——

Turned out the light.

"Oh, confound it!" shot out Tom.

It was an unexpected, a disappointing climax to a most engrossing and promising spectacle, and Tom was of a sudden "all rattled to pieces."

"It's guess work now," he declared. "Just as it was getting interesting, too!"

Still, Tom was a good guesser, and, in his rough and ready way, in two minutes' time had summed up the situation and decided what to do.

The woman was not boring a hole in the wall for nothing.

What she was doing it for there was only one way to find it out—to get into the next room, and watch developments when that auger point came through.

"I've got to protect Sandoval, I've got to fasten attempted assassination on her," mused Tom. "I can do it in the next hour, if I'm not disturbed."

Tom started out on a daring plan instantly. The window of Room 156 was just as near to his perch on the fire-escape as was Room 157.

Tom found the window of Sandoval's apartment open about an inch at the bottom; he discovered, too, that the blinds were simply closed to without locking.

He set at work. That work ended very shortly in a suppressed sigh, but one of tremendous satisfaction and relief.

He was in Sandoval's room, ceasing to wonder any longer that porch-climbers and window sneak thieves were so common.

He pushed the blinds to as they had been. Then he stood still in dismay. The window had begun to descend of its own weight.

It stopped short of the sill, however, and there was no crash. Tom tried to accustom his eyes to the darkness.

Over in one corner was a bed with a screen before it. Sandoval undoubtedly lay there asleep.

Tom planned and planned and planned. He was like enthusiastic and excited.

He would wait till the clairvoyant had developed her scheme to such an extent that proofs of its existence were undeniably apparent.

Then he would wake up Sandoval, arouse the house, capture the woman, and, incidentally, all the glory of a brilliant success in his first detective case!

He sat down noiselessly on the floor, about five feet away from the spot where he estimated the woman was at work at the other side of the partition, as eager, as nerved up as a hound watching for the appearance of its quarry.

There was the faintest glint of light in the world in the room, proceeding from some distant apartment facing on the hotel hall and reflecting dimly through the transom.

"It's coming!" announced Tom, after a breathless spell of watchfulness.

Burrow—pfft!—it was the auger pushing out the last thread of wood.

A dull, even cutting sound ensued. The woman was enlarging the hole with a saw well-greased, for it did its work almost noiselessly.

"What next?"

Tom's nerves were a thrill now. What was to come through that hole—in what guise would the menace appear that was to rob King Sandoval of his life?

There was a distinct rustle in the next room, then a cautious snapping.

Tom guessed the woman was opening the hand-bag.

And then wonder on wonder! like a

far distant aeolian strain, faint, soothing—so smooth and gentle as to be echoless—the low murmur of musical notes followed. The woman was certainly playing on the flute that Tom had seen in the next apartment.

Tom began to grow uneasy. The situation brooded ominously. Things were so unreal as to puzzle him.

The music ceased. There was a second rustle at the hole. Low, coaxing tones purred vaguely.

Tom now had sight and soul centered raptly on the aperture.

Outlines only he saw. Something blocked it, he could make that out.

Something came through.

Horrors!

He gave a start that unnerved him so that he became cold and weak all over.

A sluggish, wavy object blackened the floor sinuously, with two spots bright as fire where its head moved about.

"A snake!" gurgled the appalled Tom, way down in his throat.

The flash of conviction, the rapid memory of the clairvoyant's reference to her grewsome pets, back at the cafe, took Tom's breath away.

This woman, this siren, this snake-charmer, was sending a poisonous serpent to do her deadly work.

And before Tom could move to get out of the way, before he could command voice sufficient to raise an alarm, the reptile, making for nearest human prey, was upon him.

It crossed his feet, it wriggled its head upright with a frightful hiss.

Paralyzed as he was with terror, Tom never could understand later what supreme power of will and energy spurred him up to make a fearful struggle for life.

Like one inspired, he was on his feet instantly, and the snake, big, slimy, hissing, wriggling, was in his grasp—head nearest or tail nearest, he did not know—he was too desperate to care.

In a frenzied, frightened way he was swinging the snake around his head—fast, fast, faster!

He let go.

Crash!

Squarely for the transom he aimed, squarely it shot for the mark.

Through it the wriggling mass went,

and fell amid a shower of glass in the hall outside.

Then Tom stood like a statue, rigid. His heart seemed to have ceased beating during the terrible ordeal he had gone through. He waited for those life-taps to resume.

During all this time he had not uttered a word, had not made the slightest noise.

The crash, however, so near, so clear, must have alarmed the woman in the next room.

Tom heard her low, purring voice at the aperture.

Then he saw come through it, beckoning, fluttering brilliant jewels, as if to attract or encourage her silent ally, a white, small hand.

"In reach!" he uttered, in one fervent gasp.

He made a noiseless spring. Out shot his own sinewy fingers, true and sure as an eagle clutch.

He had the woman he could not see by the wrist firmly.

She uttered a frightened cry and tried to break free.

"Listen!" spoke Tom. "I know you—Viola, the clairvoyant. Listen! I know your accomplice, Rankin. Listen! I know your purpose—to kill the man sleeping in this room—Sandoval"

Dismay, fright, rage, mingled in a fluttering hiss from the woman's lips.

"Struggle, and I yell," pursued Tom. "I've got you. If your hand was red-hot, I wouldn't let go."

"Who—who are you?"

"A detective!" voiced Tom, proudly, and he was right!

"You—you are a boy——"

"Perhaps, but I had a man's work to do, and I've done it. See here; I give you a chance. Bad as you are, you are a little fish. It's the main guy we want. Tell me truthfully where he is to be found, now, right here—what is he putting King Sandoval out of the way for, and I'll be light on you."

Tom felt the woman's arm shiver—with hope or dread, he could not distinguish which.

"You will?" she voiced, feebly.

"Yes, I will," promised Tom.

"Bend nearer. Get your face close to

the hole. I will whisper to you, but no one else must hear."

"Yes! yes!"

All eagerness, Tom bent down to the aperture.

Too late he realized that at the acme of positive triumph there had come permanent disaster.

The woman had deftly reached through her other hand.

Up into Tom's face flew some subtle liquid.

It dizzied sight, it robbed him of strength, it deadened sense.

With a groan he relaxed his hold on the fair white wrist.

CHAPTER IX.

A HOT CHASE.

"Help!"

Tom fancied he uttered that word in an appalling scream, loud enough to reach the farthest corners of the hotel.

In reality it was a weak, choked whisper, exaggerated by his distorted senses. His brain only was active. His body held in thrall by the deadly liquid the clairvoyant had thrown into his face, Tom was like a person in a nightmare.

"Mercy!"

A second deluge of the volatile stuff—burning, stinging, blinding—struck him.

This time Tom went back with a thud. The action helped him, however. It took him out of further reach of the woman who seemed to be prepared to kill or deaden to order.

"Some poison—it will reach Sandoval, it will end both of us!" gasped Tom.

The powerful drug was diffusing itself through the room. Had it not been for the shattered transom and the slightly raised window, Tom would have probably dropped inert at once.

As it was, he could just hitch himself along on one hand and one knee, like a person grievously wounded.

The movement took him out of range of the woman, but that was not entirely what Tom was after.

He wished to reach Sandoval on the bed, to arouse, to warn him ere the deadly poison did its work.

Tom kept mumbling chokingly. Cry out he could not. His tongue was like a

cinder, the vocal channels seemed clogged up, paralyzed.

At last he reached the screen. He tipped it over in rounding it; at last he touched the bed.

"King — your majesty — Sandoval!" called Tom, huskily.

There was no response.

"Danger — kill. Arouse yourself! There's—no—one—there!"

That announced Tom's discovery. The bed was tenantless. It had not even been slept in.

For a second, rather stunned at the revelation that he had been risking life to aid a man not at all in peril or even in present evidence, Tom almost collapsed.

Then he realized his own danger. He must fight the deadly fumes hovering about him.

Tom reached the door. No key. He feebly fingered the knob, but he did not possess sufficient strength to raise himself by it.

Pressing his lips close to the crack under the door, he got enough clear air to shout.

This he did, once, twice, as loud as he could.

He heard an utterance of dismay in the next room, the sound of a hastily opened door.

It closed with a slam; a dress swished, footsteps echoed down the hall.

"She's going, she's gone!" almost wailed Tom. "Help! Fire! Police! Oh, she's going to give me the slip!"

No one responded to Tom's cries. A thought of the escaping woman aroused him. He had not strength to force the door, but there was the window.

Slowly, painfully, he reached it—one breath of the pure cool air coming in at the bottom went through him like an electric shock.

He had the sash up in a jiffy. He got out on the fire-escape platform.

There Tom clung for a minute or two, recovering from the effects of the drug that had so nearly overcome him.

All through the ordeal his brain had preserved its normal functions to the fullest degree—now it became doubly active.

"Don't dare venture into that room again," Tom told himself. "By this time the clairvoyant has reached the street.

She has fled—there is no doubt of it. Left that snake behind. Won't it create a sensation! And Sandoval wasn't in the room at all!"

All the manifold details of the situation tumbled incoherently over one another in Tom's mind.

The main issue, however, rose clear as crystal before him—he must not lose sight of the clairvoyant.

Tom went down the fire-escape ladder faster than he had come up it, reached the flat roof of the two story frame building next adjoining, ran to its front and peered over the cornice.

"In time!" he fluttered, staring down.

Viola, the clairvoyant, had just left the private entrance to the hotel.

She flitted down the pavement past his range of vision with rapid, nervous steps.

Suddenly she paused, turned her head, caught sight of a cab coming tearing down the street, and glided to the curb, holding up her finger.

"Quick!" she said, simply.

The driver only half halted his horse.

"Cab?" he queried.

"Yes—double fare, but quick!"

"Got a load, ma'am. Wait one minute, half a minute; deliver just around the corner. Then at your service."

"Hurry!" breathed Viola, in an intense tone.

Tom understood her anxiety. She feared pursuit from the hotel at any moment.

He saw his opportunity all the clearer, too, he fancied, because he knew the cabman.

On whirled the conveyance, the woman keeping on down the sidewalk to meet it as quickly as possible when it returned.

One swift, comprehensive glance Tom took of his roof environment.

He had a task to perform, and he believed himself able to execute it—reach the next street and interview the cabman before the woman met him.

It was a fearful rush and tumble. The roofs were unequal, some slanted, some were broken or littered, but Tom was dauntless.

He nearly broke his neck as he reached the corner structure, and dropped to a sign, thence to a sidewalk, and was up to the cab just as it had delivered its load.

"Bill!" he panted.

"Hello!" ejaculated cabby, with a stare—"it's Tom!"

"It is. Listen. Keep driving," and Tom bolted to the seat beside the astonished driver.

"Eh?"

"Woman waiting——"

"Yes, just hailed me. How do you know? Where did you come from?"

"Roofs. Chasing her. Bill, old friends?"

"You bet!"

"Then listen. Just take her in. Let me sit here. I must shadow that woman home."

"Get up!"

Bill urged up his horse. Tom grabbed up a lap robe and enveloped himself in it till he was unrecognizable.

He was barely in time, for the clairvoyant came bolting around the corner in a fever of hurry just then.

She cast a quick glance back of her, and running out into the street opened the cab door for herself.

"Don't stop! Fly!" she ordered, sharply.

The horse never halted. It's driver made the wheels spin till they had gone several squares.

Then a definite order as to destination came up from inside.

Tom sat muffled like a mummy, but thinking like a Trojan.

He guessed that the woman would either lead him to her home or some place where Rankin was.

As his friend the cabman turned into the street the woman had just named, Tom leaned toward him.

"Bill," he whispered.

"Attention!" came the prompt, low-toned response.

"When you leave me——"

"When I leave you—where?"

"Where the woman lands, of course."

"Ay."

"Drive to Nick Carter's."

"Hello! Are you on that lay?" bolted out Bill, wonderingly.

"Yes. Can you remember something special?"

"As if it was writ."

"Good. Tell Mr. Carter to find and hide Sandoval till he hears from me."

"Tell Mr. Carter——" and Bill went over the message word for word twice in succession like a child memorizing a lesson.

"That's it. Don't forget Sandoval—don't mix the names. Here we are."

At a word from the woman the cab circled to the curb in front of a grim, shuttered two story house.

It was detached, and as Viola, tossing a bank-note to the cab driver, alighted, ran up some steps, unlocked a door, and let herself in, Tom dropped from the seat, and, with a wave of the hand to Bill, glided into the dark side passageway.

He heard the cab rattle away, and he chuckled. Nick Carter would temporarily take King Sandoval off his hands. The king would be safe till Tom found time to personally report to the detective.

"I've run the woman to her den—the rest is easy," decided Tom.

He crouched between the two buildings and listened. He could plainly hear some one inside the house ascend a pair of stairs.

Then a window over his head was flung open, and a blaze of light struck the opposite wall.

Some one passed in the street—a man seemed to enter the house, and Tom fairly wriggled, as a minute later, overhead he plainly distinguished the sound of voices.

"The clairvoyant—Rankin," he murmured. "He must have been on the watch for her return near by. Hope he didn't see me dodge in here! I'll lay mortal quiet for a spell."

Tom devoted his energies principally to listening, but he could catch no intelligible words from overhead, and suddenly, even the hum of voices died away.

He was debating what he should next do, when, chancing to look up at that broad square of light, reflected on the opposite brick wall, he caught the outlines of active shadows.

He moved to get up and look up direct. As he did so, as he rose, a fluttering cry of dismay escaped his lips.

Something shadowed in a human hand, shot down, and he ducked involuntarily, he knew not why.

The movement did not save him, however. Over his head coiled a rope.

It caught him about the waist, imprisoning his arms.

There was a sharp jerk, and up aloft went Tom.

He had nothing to catch at, and he went up between the two brick walls with many a scrape and knock. He was dragged through the lighted window space just as he expected.

Looking up, like a hooked fish wriggling at the end of a line, he met the hard, fierce glances of Rankin and the clairvoyant, just as he had anticipated.

The man slammed down the window, pulled the shade, and his lips grew stern.

The woman glared at Tom piercingly, and in the depths of her dark eyes Tom read hatred and cruelty.

"You were right, Rankin," she said. "It is the boy who carried my hand-bag, therefore, the one I dosed in Sandoval's room."

"And the boy we discovered in the ice-box at the cafe, and whom I supposed to be in safe keeping there yet. Lucky I saw him dodge from the cab. Lucky you lassoed him. Now then, my young friend, you sit there and answer questions."

He lifted Tom and fairly threw him into a chair. Tom tried to look saucy and act independent.

"Oh, I don't know!" he remarked.

"We have no time to trifle," spoke the man, rapidly, and with vigor. "You will answer one question promptly without evasion, or we will make a short shrift for you. Who put you up to shadowing us?"

"I'll answer nothing——" began Tom.

"The crystal room—no time for fooling, Rankin!" cried Viola.

These people meant every word they said—Tom learned that the next moment.

The man seized him; the woman tore open a door. Into a room and upon a broad couch in its centre Tom was flung.

Slam! went the door—hiss—hiss! A series of ominous sounds ensued. Tom tried to get up, failed, tried again, didn't even want to; experienced a delightful languor, and, half guessing he was in an apartment supplied by faucets with some exhilarating but deadening gas, he sank back, content to dream.

CHAPTER X.

FOUR HOURS.

"And the boy?"

"I will attend to the boy."

Tom shuddered. Where was he? He did not know. He did know, however, that the speakers were Rankin and the clairvoyant, and that the tones of the latter contained a deadly menace that chilled him.

Darkness was all about him. The speakers were in another room, but neither they nor himself were in the apartments where he had last lost consciousness—Tom felt sure of this.

"It's a bad bungle, I'll admit," came Viola's voice again. "We've had to desert the city house for fear this boy sent some word to that—that—oh! I could scratch his eyes out!—Nick Carter!"

"Yes, he's in the case," spoke Rankin.

"Then we are not safe here. It's fix the boy so he can't ever take the witness stand, and get out of the country. If Nick Carter knows the whole scheme, he'll never rest till we're placed where we won't trouble Sandoval for some years to come."

The woman's teeth clicked viciously. Tom could hear them. It momentarily lighted up his anxiety, and uncertainty to hear this wholesome praise of the great detective.

"No!" answered Rankin, definitely.

"No, what?"

"Leaving the country, getting scared, abandoning a good hundred thousand dollars, more nearly in our grasp than ever."

"You don't mean it, Rankin!"

"I do."

"Why——"

"Listen. I am satisfied that although Nick Carter is in this case, that drugged boy in the next room has not communicated to him his suspicions, clues, or whatever he may have—yet."

"He never shall, then!" grated the woman.

"I leave that to you. You say he will not come out from under the influence of his medicine for several hours. Don't let him ever. You attend to him solely; I will see to the other end of the affair."

"You have found a way to encompass your designs regarding Sandoval?"

"Have I!"

"Ah, then I slip up on my ten thousand dollars!" muttered Viola, disappointedly.

"Not a bit of it. Listen."

Tom listened, too, with all his might, and he came nearer to listen.

He sat up on what felt like a mattress. He got off it.

There was a window—open. These were careless plotters! No, they had only depended too fully on their drugs.

Looking down ten feet, Tom saw a horse standing attached to a light wagon.

"Why, I'm good as free!" he fluttered.

Then he neared the partition beyond which the voices sounded, came up against a shaky door, glued his eye to a crack, and fancied himself the luckiest boy that ever tried to become a detective.

"Listen," repeated Rankin. "This boy seems to be one of that drove of meddling pupils Nick Carter is letting loose on the community."

"Some of them have done some pretty thorough work, all the same," muttered Viola.

"This one won't. It's three o'clock in the morning now. Before this hour arrives again, King Sandoval will have received his quietus."

"You are sure?"

"He is now, at this moment, speeding so straight, so surely to his death, that nothing but a miracle can save him."

The woman uttered an impressive sigh of curiosity and suspense. Tom thrilled at the ominous announcement.

"Briefly," pursued Rankin, "when you failed last night I said four times and out."

"I deserve your reproach," murmured the woman, bitterly, "but I did my best."

"And no fault I found. I learned that Sandoval, frightened by the flower-box business, had not gone to his room at the hotel at all."

"Ah! my work would have been fruitless then, even if this boy had not interfered?"

"Exactly. I decided on a bold move. I learned that he had bribed the hotel clerk to say nothing about his leaving, but had taken quarters at another hotel near by."

"I never counted on that," breathed Viola.

"Then," continued Rankin, "I resolved on a daring move—to risk all. Heretofore I had kept strictly in the background. I formulated my plan, I made sure where Sandoval was, I prepared my game, and I went to see him."

"Well!"

"He was glad to meet me again. I led the conversation promptly to the attempts on his life. I told him that knowledge of the same had brought me from Rochester, post haste, to his side—I persuaded him that the attempts on his life were being made by hired emissaries of the insurgents of his home kingdom of Norona."

"A clever play," commented the clairvoyant.

"I told him that a messenger from his kingdom, friendly to him, had come to the home of my sister, expecting to find him with her. He brought some important papers. How I arranged the details, never mind, but I succeeded in convincing Sandoval that he must be at a certain remote place with that box of papers at a certain hour to-day, to meet the messenger, who dared not show himself in New York. With that box of papers closely sealed, I saw Sandoval take the two o'clock train on the Midland Central for Doversville, forty miles west of here."

"Why! what was your object?"

"He will reach Doversville at four o'clock. I enjoined him to speak to no one, to evade being seen, to cling to that box, to stop nowhere. Alighting at Doversville he will start along the track of a branch railroad on foot, which I described to him. There is not a station for twenty miles, and that is Martinsburg. I told him to reach that place, at about ten o'clock in the morning. He would find his friend there."

"Rankin," interrupted the clairvoyant, "what can all this circumlocution mean?"

"Success."

"How?"

"Our man will never reach Martinsburg."

"Ah!"

"No. At exactly eight o'clock, at some lonely stretch of roadbed, King Sandoval will meet his doom."

"You arouse my curiosity."

"The box of papers is not a box of papers."

"Then——"

"But," continued Rankin, impressively, "a box of dynamite, supplied with a clockwork fuse, timed to strike fire at just eight o'clock this morning!"

"Clever!"

"Horrible!"

The listening Tom broke into a cold perspiration. He almost fell against the ramshackly door.

His breath came in painful gasps. The cool heartlessness of these plotters, the sure, direful danger menacing King Sandoval, appalled him.

"In other words," concluded Rankin, lifting from his pocket a long envelope and waving it triumphantly, "by noon to-day the telegraph will announce that enough of an unfortunate being has been picked up along the tracks near Martinsburg to be identified as the remains of Sandoval, king of Norona.

"Before a week, on the strength of that identification, I shall present this to the proper parties, and draw my well-earned reward—one hundred thousand dollars."

In indescribable agitation, Nick Carter's newsboy friend wavered where he stood.

He noted the official-looking envelope, he observed on the table where the two plotters sat, at Rankin's elbow, a revolver—he took in every detail of his environment in a frenzy born of desperate resolve.

Was ever such a cold-blooded crime meditated?—was ever human being placed in the terrible circumstances of responsibility that now surrounded him? He forgot for the moment that he was Nick Carter's pupil, an emissary of justice—he became a purely impulsive, generous-hearted boy only, indignant at an awful wrong, inspired to save the life of an imperiled human being.

Creak—he drew the door open in a flash. Grab—grip—one hand tore the envelope from the grasp of the astounded Rankin, the other snatched up the revolver at his elbow.

"Move, and I fire!" rang out clear and menacing as a pistol shot.

"The boy!" screamed the clairvoyant.

"We are lost if he——"

"Escapes? I've done it!"

Doughty Tom finished the sentence. He fairly slid back into the room. He was across it and at the open window in a twinkling.

He heard the others after him. It was a leap for life—a race for life after that.

He barely glanced down. Then he poised on the window sill, a deliberate purpose in view.

Slam!—he landed where he aimed for—the box of the wagon below.

Undoubtedly this vehicle had been employed by Rankin to bring him to this secluded part of Jersey City.

The sharp noise aroused the unhitched horse. It started up with a snort.

Tom was flung to the floor of the wagon. Scrambling up, he saw two void, white faces back at the window of the house from which he had just escaped.

Tom got hold of the whip, and lashed up the horse. His initial idea was to get beyond pursuit.

This point he safely covered, after one or two turns. Then he began to know where he was.

"The Midland?" he soliloquized, breathlessly. "That must be two miles away. Left at two? The explosion at eight. If I only had wings!"

Heart and soul, mind, nerves, energy—Tom became an ardent living spirit of resolve and endeavor as he flew down the deserted streets.

The horse was in a lather, his hands chafed and cut with urging and holding the steed, as he drew up beside the fence surrounding the track yards of the Midland Central Railroad.

"Whoa!"

Tom jumped from the wagon, abandoning it, and darted through a break in the fence.

He made out the passenger depot perhaps three hundred yards ahead, with few lights and little stir or action about it.

Here, however, an engine puffed on the main track, seemingly coaled and watered for some early morning run.

Near it was a shanty, with several men lounging, fixing lanterns and getting ready for work.

Tom approached one of them who was smoking and half reclining on a bench.

"Mister," he said, sharply, "this is the Midland?"

"Sure."

"I want to get to Doversville."

"Right place, my son."

"How soon?"

"Two hours — first train out six o'clock."

"And when do we arrive?" inquired Tom, dubiously.

"Slow local—eight-forty-five."

"I can't wait!" answered Tom, vehemently.

"Got to, I reckon. No other road runs there, and—you see that engine?" asked the man, pointing to the one steamed up."

"Yes," nodded Tom.

"I run her—twenty-three. She takes out the Doversville accommodation."

Tom retreated to the fence. On a pile of rails he sat down.

He was quivering with uncertainty, excitement, suspense.

He must overtake King Sandoval—how?

Every moment was precious. At eight o'clock—four brief hours ahead—the timed box of dynamite would go off.

Telegraph? The local offices were not open. Hasten to the police? A vital hour would be lost.

A phantom picture crossed Tom's mind at that instant, and made him almost frantic.

It was that of the man he had been hired to watch by Nick Carter—innocent, deluded, unsuspecting King Sandoval—pursuing the lonely railroad tracks, bound for Martinsburg and—doom.

"I must reach him, I will reach him!" cried Tom, springing to his feet like some knight-errant spurred to mighty effort by a direful, vital exigency.

Tom's eye was glowing with a mad, reckless, heroic resolve.

He cast one glance at the shanty, one at the puffing locomotive.

Then he made a sharp run for the engine, leaped into the cab, grasped the lever, threw open the throttle and—they were off!

CHAPTER XI.

THE CRITICAL MOMENT.

"Stop her!"

"The mischief! Is he crazy!"

Toot-toot!

Tom knew something about the interior mechanism of a locomotive, but not sufficient to start up without a jerk that sent his cap spinning, and the wheels of the engine plowing the polished rails with a rippetty-rip whir that brought the men about the railroad shanty to their feet in consternation.

He was off with a thrill, and one glance ahead, showing the main track set with clear signals. He gave the whistle-rope a triumphant jerk.

Then Tom subsided to the cushioned seat of the engineer, trembling from head to foot, his hopeful yet apprehensive heart going like a trip hammer.

"I've done it! There's no backing out now," he breathed. "Fifteen minutes after four."

Tom read the time on the little cab clock, and reckoned as far as he could the chances of his arriving safely at his proposed destination.

Until clear out of the city, he passed only a dozen persons—two were watchmen, the others railroad employees going to their work.

They simply stared after the scudding "special," which they supposed it to be. Where there were a lot of switches, a man in the signal tower made some frantic gesticulations from its window.

Not understanding them, Tom could not heed them. It was fortunate that he had done what no regular engineer had ever dared to do—cross the tracks of two other systems without stopping—at an early hour when trains were few.

"Seven miles," read Tom from a flying mile post. "How long has it taken? Sixteen minutes. At this rate I shall be at Doversville before six o'clock. I dare go faster now."

Tom grew calmer as moments and miles sped away. There were two sets of rails, few switches, and he ventured to increase speed slowly.

He passed the depot of quite a large town. There was some stir about it, and he pulled the lever another notch, for he feared the train crew might telegraph ahead to stop him, and he hoped to reach his destination before local operators got to their duties.

He piled in some coal and manipulated

the steam valves haphazard. Everything seemed to be going all right.

A slight qualm of fear oppressed Tom as he fancied the results of his wild escapade.

He had blocked a system, disturbed its schedule—he might wind up in damage and disaster.

"Can't help it," piped Tom. "What's forty railroads to one human life? Let her go! My!"

Tom held his breath as he turned a curve. A locomotive ahead seemed bearing directly down on him, but as it came nearer it passed safely on the other track.

His joy knew no bounds as he flashed past a little station bearing the indication that it was thirty miles from the city. It was just twenty-five minutes of six.

"I shall be in time, sure—a full two hours to put after Sandoval," calculated Tom. "What's this?—what's this?"

Tom, of course, had no means of knowing that No. 23 here left the train, reversed, and got headed right for a return to the city after running up to Doversville, so before he knew it he was off on a spur track and headed for a turntable.

Tom turned pale as he snatched at the lever and throttle. He turned paler as the locomotive halted with a jerk, two wheels off the rails, and tilted dangerously for the turntable pit, which it had narrowly escaped going into.

He tried to get it back on the track, but made matters worse instead.

"Stuck!" he muttered, grimly—"now whatever am I to do?"

There seemed nothing for it but to foot it the remaining ten miles.

Tom was a good runner, and in shape for a fair sprint, but he doubted very much if he could overtake Sandoval before eight o'clock now.

He buckled manfully down to his task, however. Back the spur track he ran, headed down the main road bed, and just passing the little depot building, halted with a cheery cry.

Tilted up against the structure was the railroad agent's bicycle. Tom's eyes danced. No one was in view, and he had it on the rails in a twinkling.

"Great!" he voiced, as he got the hang of the contrivance, and whirled ahead at the rate of twenty miles an hour.

Doversville! There was the sign—here was his destination at last.

Tom ditched the bicycle, ran to the depot pump, took a deep draught of cooling water, and glanced in at the depot window.

"Just five minutes after six he murmured. "Oh, say! is this the railroad running to Martinsburg?"

A man passing in a loaded farm wagon nodded assentingly in reply to the question, and Tom started down a single road bed leading into the timber.

According to Rankin's statement this was the route Sandoval would pursue. He must have got pretty near to Martinsburg by this time," Tom decided.

"There's just one thing sure," he ruminated—"between here and Martinsburg I shall find him. There's only one thing to do—count on running twenty miles in two hours, if necessary and keeping my eye out sharp so I don't pass him on the way."

After proceeding what he judged to be about twelve miles, Tom was more excited than flustered as he sat down on a heap of railroad ties to rest.

"I shall catch Sandoval before eight o'clock," he told himself, confidently. "I've run the first twelve miles in a little over an hour. It was a spurt, but—I won't be beat! I'll take a look around and forge ahead."

Tom climbed to the top of the heap of ties. It was loose, it was wobbly but he got a secure foothold at its apex.

Shading his eyes with his hands, he took a good look down the straight road bed.

"No one in sight," he reported. "Sandoval's got a good lead on me, that's sure."

Tom wondered if he might not have passed Sandoval, and he trembled inwardly.

But as he swept the rugged, brambly stretch lining the railroad he was reassured, for no sane being would choose such a difficult course when offered the much smoother route of the ballasted trackways.

Just completing this survey, however, Tom checked his glance at a spot some thirty feet from the tracks, stared hard,

peered closer yet, and gave utterance to a startled:

"I declare!"

He was very greatly surprised at what he saw—so much so that it took him a minute or two to realize fully what he had discovered.

"It's my man, it's Sandoval," breathed Tom. "Lucky? oh, just!"

Over near a lot of straggly bushes, lying flat on the ground, apparently sound asleep, was the kingly personage in whom Tom had taken so powerful an interest during the past twenty-four hours.

Not a bit royal looking, however, was the ruler of Norona. His attire was disordered, his features were flushed and swollen, and by his side was a token that he was ruled by a monarch stronger far than himself.

"Two kings," mused Tom—"King Sandoval and King Alcohol, and the last holds the winning hand at present. Too bad. Mr. Carter says he drinks to drown his troubles. He's been dousing them good since daybreak, then, for there's a quart bottle, and it's empty."

Tom reasoned out the situation. Sandoval, after being put aboard the train by Rankin, had secured the liquor in some way, had solaced his lonely walk from Doversville with frequent potations, had stumbled off the course and had dropped into a sodden heap.

"Box and all," continued Tom. "Say, to think of it! Fifty masked deaths in that little box, and—he's got it under his head as a pillow!"

Tom thrilled and his fingers twitched. How gingerly would he remove that box—how speedily hurl it rods away from shore, into that pool of water he saw at a little distance!

With something like the irrepressible hurrah-wave of the miner who calls "Eureka!" or the venturesome explorer who thrills the air with an echoing "Excelsior!" on some far mountain top, Tom gave a slight cheer as he made a dash for terra firma.

"Whew!" was jolted forcibly out of him.

He slid instead of leaped; he fell, rolled, for the second time that day felt his senses deserting him, rallied them

after a momentary blur, and then—knew the worst.

It was the very worst. In a word, he had dislodged the loose logs forming the heap of ties, and they had borne him down, imprisoning him.

Tom did not mind the bruises and scratches he experienced, the terrific blow on the head that had so nearly stunned him, the excruciating pain of one limb now held as in a vise way back in the topsy-turvy heap.

It was his utter helplessness that confounded him. In a frenzied way Tom realized that he was a captive, held so close, so firmly, that to move meant to bring down upon him a score of crushing logs, that, unaided, he could never hope to escape.

It was singular how, without breaking every bone in his body, the mass held both feet from the knees down in a clasp as neat as if artificially produced. Tom looked about him in despair.

"I can't get out without help, I may as well make my mind up to that," he muttered, grimly, at last. "What time is it? Pretty near half-past seven. I must wake Sandoval up, arouse him to his danger, dispose of the dynamite and get him to help me out of this fix."

Tom fancied that an easy task, but he found out his mistake after ten minutes' effort.

He shouted at Sandoval, he whistled, he screamed. The man might be deaf, stone dead, for all the attention he paid.

"This is serious!" muttered Tom. "Why, if I shouldn't be able to arouse him——"

Tom's heart stood still, and he shuddered as he thought out the balance of that dread sentence.

Sandoval was some twenty feet from him, and the bushes screened him slightly.

Tom reached out for all the missiles in view. They were not numerous—a few little pieces of gravel and fragments of bark.

He began to shy these at the sleeper. Some fell short of their mark from sheer lightness, others grazed with no effect.

Those that struck the slumberer's features only made him stir slightly, as might a fly walking across his face.

"He's dead gone, and we're both gone up!" decided Tom, gloomily, after half an hour of futile shouting and fusilading. "It's drawing near the hour. It's pretty close up to—oh, what's that!"

It was a low, ominous, whirring sound.

It came directly from inside the box that pillowed the head of the sleeping King Sandoval, but it never ruffled his sodden wits.

"We're a goner!" pronounced Tom, in an awed, lots whisper. "The dynamite is beginning to go off!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE SECRET OUT.

Tom counted the seconds and held his breath.

"It'll soon be over," he choked up. "I've done my duty, and Nick Carter will say so!"

It was hard to give up life at the threshold of a great victory, but Tom faced that whirring dynamite box bravely.

Real defectives have pluck. Tom had lots of it, and he never winced as he realized that he could scarcely escape the fate that menaced the sodden-sleeping Sandoval.

Tom had set his lips firmly, had half-closed his eyes. He opened them abruptly.

"The secret!" he murmured. "Wonder what it was, after all? That wretch Rankin will get his hundred thousand dollars. What for? Have I time to find out? The deuce!"

From his coat pocket Tom drew forth the paper he had snatched from Rankin's hand.

He barely scanned it. One glance was sufficient to enlighten him.

It was an insurance policy—the secret was out!

"King Sandoval's life is insured for one hundred thousand dollars in favor of his brother-in-law, Delos Rankin!" cried the startled Tom. "The week he was in Rochester he must have filled the king with drugs and liquor, had him examined, passed, without knowing it, and—what a scheme!"

Whir—snap! chilled Tom's heart, and the paper so precious an hour since, so

useless to him in his present predicament, fluttered to the ground.

The sounds he had just heard told him that the fuse inside the box of dynamite had probably been lighted.

Tom's fingers closed about the revolver he had taken from his pocket with the paper—the weapon with which he had cowed its owner, Rankin.

He fired a shot in the air, and eagerly watched Sandoval.

The latter never moved. It seemed as if a cannon fired at his ear would fail to arouse him, so profound was his sleep.

Then Tom pricked up his ears anew. Another sound, a louder sound, drowned out all those clicking, whirring demonstrations from the box under Sandoval's head.

"A train!" he breathed. "I hear it. I see it. The headlight, the cab. Stop! Hey! Help! help! help!"

Tom screamed like a madman. His eyes started from their sockets, he waved one hand frantically.

"They must stop!" he cried, shrilly.

Bang—bang—bang—bang!

What guided his hand but frenzied impulse Tom could not tell, but every shot told on the windows of the cab.

Toot! toot! down brakes; hiss-swish! the train came to a stop.

"This way!—oh, this way!" shouted Tom.

"What's this? Who fired? Train robbers?" demanded the engineer, storming up to the spot, an iron bar in his hand.

"No, say—quick! See that man asleep?"

"See him? I should say——"

"The box under his head—oh, for mercy's sake! No delay, no questions. Get it. That's it. Throw it far as you can!"

"Burr-rr-r!"

If the quick pistol shots and the crashing panes in the cab had startled the engineer, the frightful, awful explosion of the dynamite box, hurled into the water pool just in time, fairly scared him out of his wits.

Running for his life back to the locomotive, his clothing riddled with gravel fired like bullets, drenched with a deluge like a waterspout, he was screaming in affright like a maniac.

King Sandoval woke up at last. He stared vaguely about him.

"What was that?" he maundered.

"Your death-warrant!" pronounced Tom, solemnly.

"What do you say!"

"Voided by a supersedeas from Nick Carter—arrived just in time!"

The conductor of the train, supported by a crowd of passengers, came hurrying pale-faced to the spot.

For ten minutes life was an incoherent whirl to every person in the vicinity.

They even made Tom tell his story over twice before they consented to set him free.

Then, as he was helped to the train, the wonderful thing he had done began to dawn on the throng, and he was a hero clear to the next station.

Tom was in bad shape for walking with his bruised limbs, but he had the sense and courage to immediately impress the telegraph into his service.

Nick Carter got a very complete idea of what had happened, and who had caused it to happen, within the next hour.

Tom and Sandoval were directed by the detective to return to New York on the noon train.

Their reception at the city depot was in the nature of an ovation.

Nick and several of his students formed one welcoming party, a group of reporters another.

The Sandoval case was public property at last, because, through Tom's directions, the arrest of both Rankin and the clairvoyant, Viola, had been consummated that morning.

Tom was a happy boy when, an honored guest in the detective's house that afternoon, Nick Carter told him that every move he made in the Sandoval case was a positive stroke of genius.

Tom's protege, Blind Billy, was present. Sandoval had been inquiring into affairs during the past hour, and he had promised to put the little fellow, as well as brave, loyal Tom, beyond all danger of neglect before he returned to his kingdom.

"What's the 'full account of' they're hollering outside, Tom?" asked Billy, as his quick ears caught the turbulent calls of scurrying newsboys.

Tom blushed, too modest to tell.

"It's about this young hero, Billy," said Sandoval, placing a grateful hand on Tom's shoulder—"it's about the wonderful exploits of Nick Carter's Newsboy Friend."

"Right!" nodded the detective himself. "Full account of a boy who is able to give a most excellent account of himself, as the central figure in elucidating the ins and outs of the Great Sandoval Mystery."

THE END.

The next number will contain "Working in the Dark; or, A Novice Lends a Helping Hand." FF 424

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